



THE GREAT DEBATE: CONSCRIPTION AND NATIONAL SERVICE 1912-1972



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FROM SCHEYVILLE TO VIETNAM: MY CONSCRIPTION EXPERIENCE

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I've found that whenever I've been asked to address the subjects of Conscription, Scheyville or Vietnam, the audience invariably wants to understand the context. I therefore intend to address this talk in four parts:

How **BIG** was the problem that caused Australia to introduce Conscription?;

How **SMALL** was the National Service scheme proposed and introduced?;

How **GOOD** was the execution of the scheme introduced?; and

How **EFFECTIVE** was the scheme, considering the outcome produced?

Cast your minds back to the '60s. Whatever else you may remember, every adult who lived in the '60s will remember the "Cold War"...

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HOW **BIG** WAS THE PROBLEM?



Cast your minds back to the '60s. Whatever else you may remember, every adult who lived in the '60s will remember the "Cold War"...



While the main events were happening in the Northern Hemisphere, the effects were seen and felt

all over the world. Since the Second World War, national borders had been redrawn, nations were rejecting former colonial powers or being newly created and wars of “national independence” were being orchestrated in those former colonies not immediately granted independence by their former colonial administrators.

Wherever there was an independence movement, there was either a pro-communist leader waiting to take over or a pro-communist movement waiting on the sidelines, ready to challenge the new government as soon as possible. Sometimes the challenging movement cloaked itself as a “nationalist” rather than a “socialist” movement (as in Vietnam) but almost without exception, the movement, once revealed was supported by the communists and once successful, took a procommunist position.

So marked was this trend that the term “Cold War” came to include not only the huge powers contending in the northern hemisphere but also included the spread of communist influence by the series of “national liberation” movements. I’ll expand on this later when we discuss the “Domino Theory”.

After World War II, the British Empire – the largest of the colonial empires – found itself at the centre of a transition from Empire to Commonwealth. It found it was no longer able to support all the bases and military presences which had marked its previous hundred years:



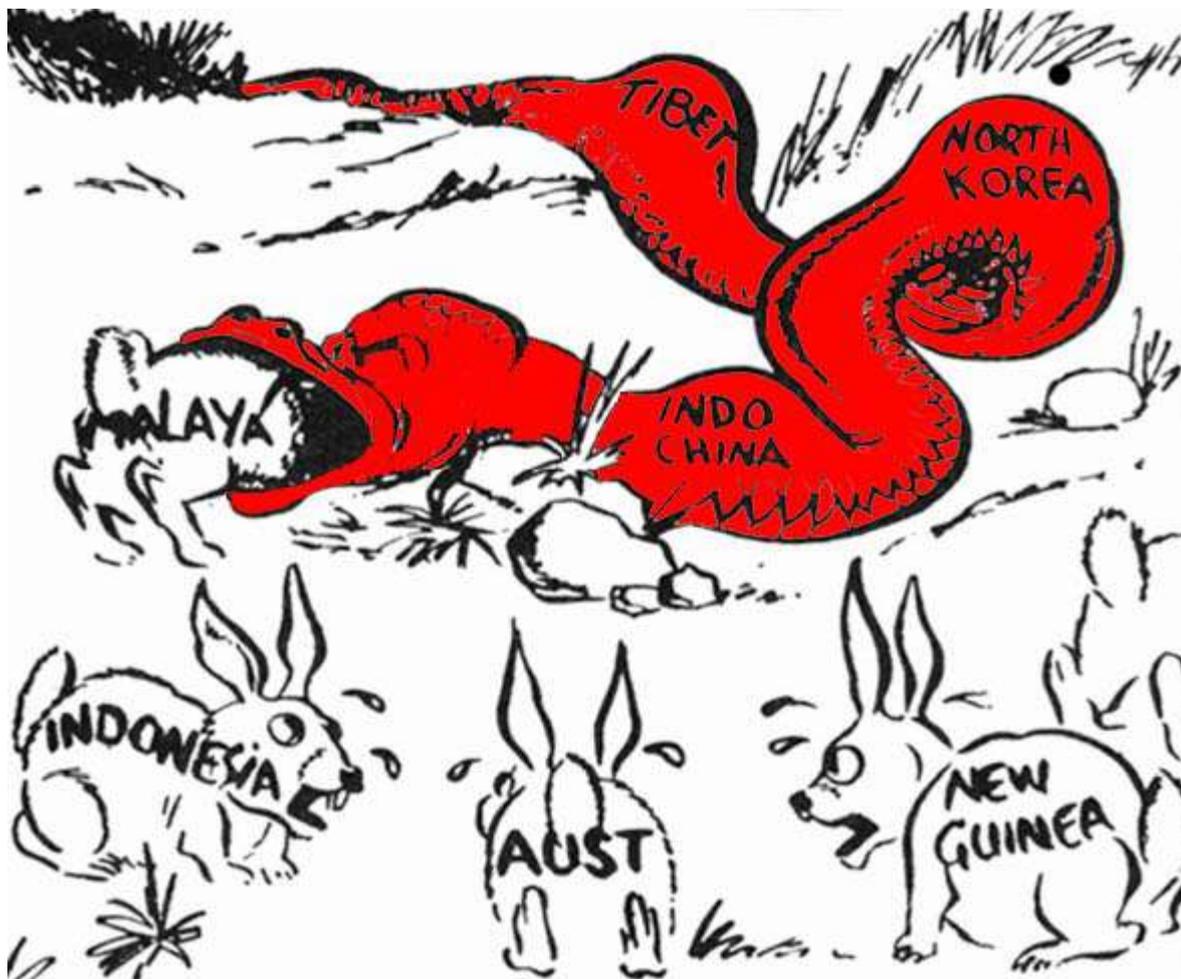
The UK Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, in his “Winds of Change” speech, flagged a withdrawal of UK military forces from all bases “east of Suez”.

This included Singapore, which alarmed Australia...

It left a vacuum not only in Singapore but elsewhere in South East Asia and the Western Pacific.

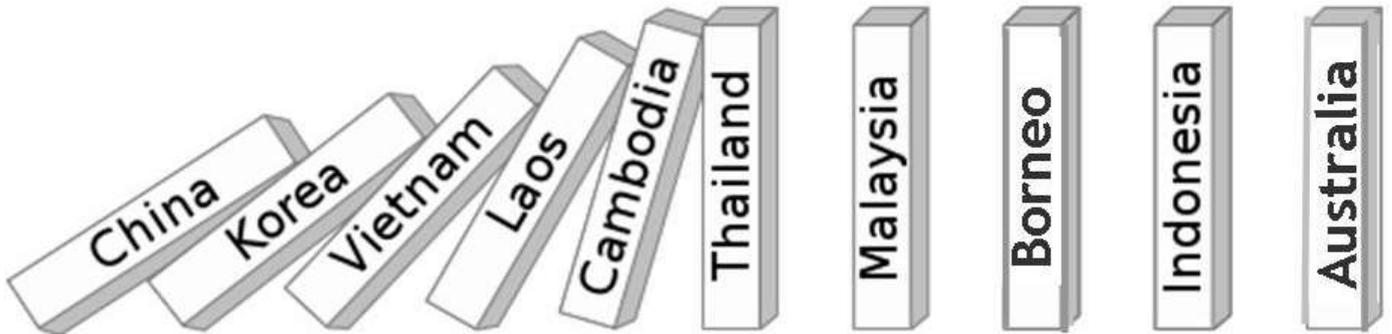
The USA, with major bases in Japan, the Philippines and a number of islands in the Western Pacific, replaced the UK naval presence but they did not have a presence on the Asian mainland.

Both the UK and Australia were aware of what the UK withdrawal meant to the spread of Cold War communism – they saw the issue in pictorial language as represented by the “Red Snake” of Communist China:



China, having embraced communism in 1949, exiled Chiang Kai-shek, quickly swallowed Tibet in '50-'51 and had supported North Korea against a UN force in the early '50s. They had also aided the Viet Minh in expelling the French colonial forces from their IndoChina colonies. It was now supporting Ho Chi Minh in his invasion of South Vietnam (pictured as a Vietnamese nationalist movement to “reunify” Vietnam which had never been a “unified” nation previously), and was actively subverting the newly formed Malaysia by sending Communist Terrorists (CTs) across the Thai-Malay border. This was what the “Malayan Emergency” was all about.

If Malaysia fell, the next large target would be Indonesia but that would not be a problem – the Indonesian leader was Sukarno, who was already pro-communist. The next target after that would be either or both Australia and/or Papua New Guinea. The Americans saw the same threat but didn't "picture" it in the same terms. They saw the threat in much-simpler terms – the "Domino Theory":



Indonesia was, at this time, starting an insurgency campaign aimed at Malaysia in Borneo while, at the same time, "rattling the sabre" at Australia and its dependency, New Guinea...

Australia therefore had at least four significant threats to her future in the mid-'60s...



**REPLACE UK IN
S.E.ASIA**



**RESIST COLD WAR
EXPANSION**



**ADDRESS SUKARNO'S
THREATS**



**BUILD OUR MILITARY
(FROM BOOM-TIME LOW RECRUITMENT)**



The first three would need troops as part of the solution, so it was determined that the highest priority would have to be the building of our military – particularly the Army.

In the early '60s, Australia had three Infantry Battalions (1RAR, 2RAR and 3RAR), one of which was at any time stationed in Malaya assisting the UK forces stationed at the Butterworth base and another one preparing for or just back from that duty. It was also in the process of building a fourth Battalion (4RAR) to deploy to Borneo to counter Sukarno's insurgency there.

This meant that we had some fewer than 3000 front-line "combat-ready" Infantry soldiers with the proportional amount of Armoured, Artillery and Engineering etc support.

It was a time of near-full employment. Military recruiting was slow and military life was not attractive. The only way to quickly build military forces was to introduce conscription.

This became the first priority...

With the front-line forces doubled, then quickly re-doubled, it was hoped that the immediate effect would be to stop Sukarno's threats, and that we would then have the forces to replace the UK influence in South East Asia.

Vietnam as a military commitment was not on the discussion table at this time, other than the Army Advisors already committed to Vietnam by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) which, in the early '60s numbered some 30 personnel and growing slowly. Later in the '60s, this group would grow to become the AATTV, known informally as "The Team".

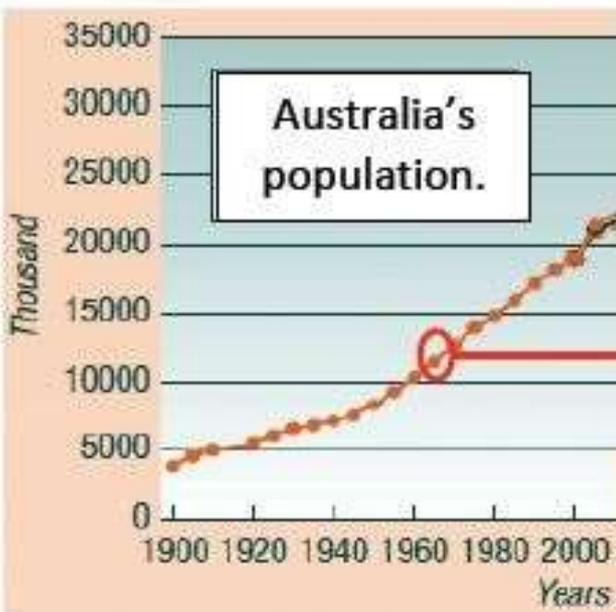
Conscription was introduced, first to grow the Army as a counter to Sukarno and secondarily to be able to replace UK forces and therefore help stop the perceived threat of communist expansion into Malaya, Singapore, Borneo and New Guinea.

Vietnam was not yet (publicly) on the agenda.



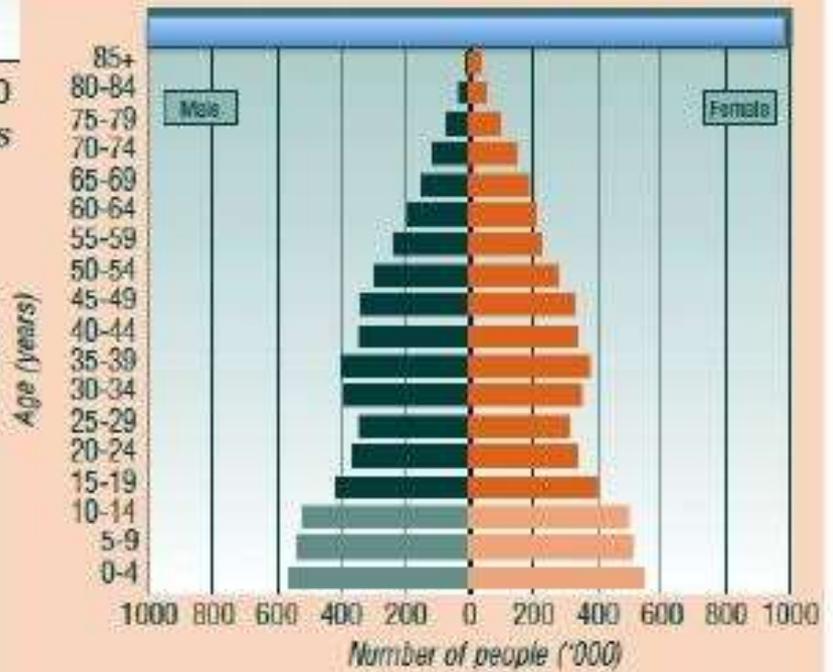
(After National Service was under way, Australia stood ready to tap Sukarno on the shoulder...)

HOW SMALL WAS THE PLAN?



Australia's population in 1965 was 11.5 million, numbered by 5-year age-groups as per this 1961 chart plus a margin for growth. Males aged 20-24 inclusive numbered about 350,000. Divide this by five to get only 20-year-olds = 70,000.

Over the seven years of conscription 1965 thru 1972, the total number eligible for Call Up was therefore some 500,000+. That's about five MCGs full of people:



Of these, 63,735 were called up – that's one in eight or about two-thirds of one MCG. Of these, 15,531 served overseas – that's about one in four of those called up and is shown by the un-shaded area in the MCG crowd.

Of these, 212 died overseas – 1.36%. That's about the number covered by the SMALL white box.

From 1965 to 1972 inclusive, at least 612 twenty & twenty-one-year-old males died in road accidents alone in Australia. That's about the number covered by the LARGE white box.



So..... was conscription *really* a "lottery of death" as the protesters claimed, or was driving in Australia actually more lethal?

HOW GOOD WAS THE EXECUTION

The first step in the conscription process was that all males registered in the year they would turn 20. Birthdates would be selected and those with the selected birthdates would be called up.

A series of pre-call-up medical, psychological and other (eg, language, conscientious objection etc) tests were the second step of the process. The Call Up was to include only the best available...

The common theme here and throughout the scheme was to “level the playing field”. It was not to bring everyone “down” to a common level but rather, to raise everyone to the highest common factor. The scheme needed people who would be good potential soldiers AND who could fit in to small and large teams. To do that, all conscripts had to be considered equal:



Equal selection and legal criteria; equal health; equal haircuts, uniforms, food, accommodation, discipline, drill and so on, with equal deadlines and equal discipline applied for failure.



They had physical training standards applied equally and were required to play all sports on offer. This built teamwork in small and large teams. In field training, they all did the same courses, fieldcraft and weapon training irrespective of where they may spend the rest of their service life.

All conscripts were given exactly the same recruit training as given to Regular Army recruits and – at least in the early days – the conscripts used the Regular Army Recruit Training Battalions (RTBs) at Puckapunyal in Victoria and Kapooka in New South Wales.

In addition to the teamship building and the most basic of physical training, the recruits were, of course, introduced to the tools of their new trade – weapons and equipment...



Even if this was only as far as National Service went, it would have been a success. Almost every “Nasho” will remember mates from their RTB days and from their first posting. The bonds formed by the sharing of this – for almost all of them – unique experience made for life-long friendships and in many cases, a change in the direction of their personal and career choices thereafter.

The Recruit training lasted about six weeks and produced a basic soldier who could then be trained into the Corps of their selection or allocation. Recruits went from the RTBs to Corps training, where they learned the skills appropriate to their posting – Infantry mainly, but also Artillery, Armour, Engineers and any other Corps that suited their skills or pre-Call-Up training.

The National Service scheme introduced in 1965 included the provision for conscripts with their Leaving Certificate and who volunteered for it, to enter a 22-week Officer Training course. In the first week of recruit training, the officer candidate selection process began.....



There were written tests where spelling, grammar and general knowledge were assessed including some maths and problem-solving exercises. The candidates also had, at short notice, to address their peers and the assessment officers on a variety of subjects both with and without notice.

Candidates were required to do quick changes of uniform from one activity to another and were timed and assessed on their speed, attitude and relationships with other candidates.

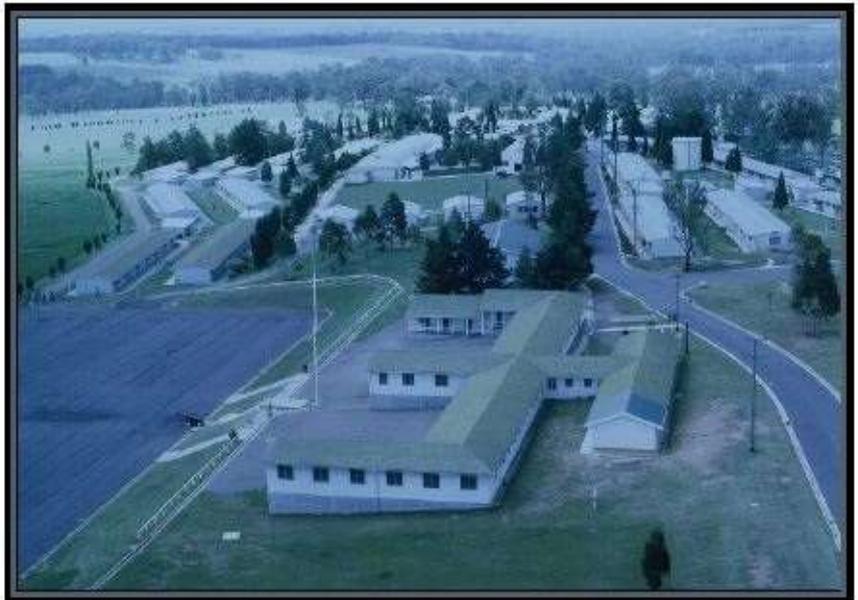
Perhaps the most revealing activities were the leaderless problem-solving exercises...



With the assessment officers ever present, groups of 6 to 8 candidates were placed in a sand pit or selected location, given a variety of items and set a problem to be resolved within a set time limit but without a nominated leader. The idea was that the “natural leaders” would emerge – the ones who came up with a solution, convinced the others to do it and whose plan succeeded.

As an example, in the centre picture above, a group has been told to cross from one concrete block to the other without touching the ground between. In another example, the group is given a variety of items and told to achieve an objective – for example, to lift a water-filled 44-gallon drum off the ground.

The assessment period covered several days and the numbers of candidates was pared back from (in the first intake’s case) many hundreds of applicants to about 60 candidates from each of the two RTBs. The 120-odd officer cadet candidates were then flown to 1OTU, Scheyville...



The Scheyville course was a 22-week pressure-packed exercise in producing a National Service junior officer with three attributes – an Infantry Platoon commander capable of fighting Counter Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) in a South East Asia environment.

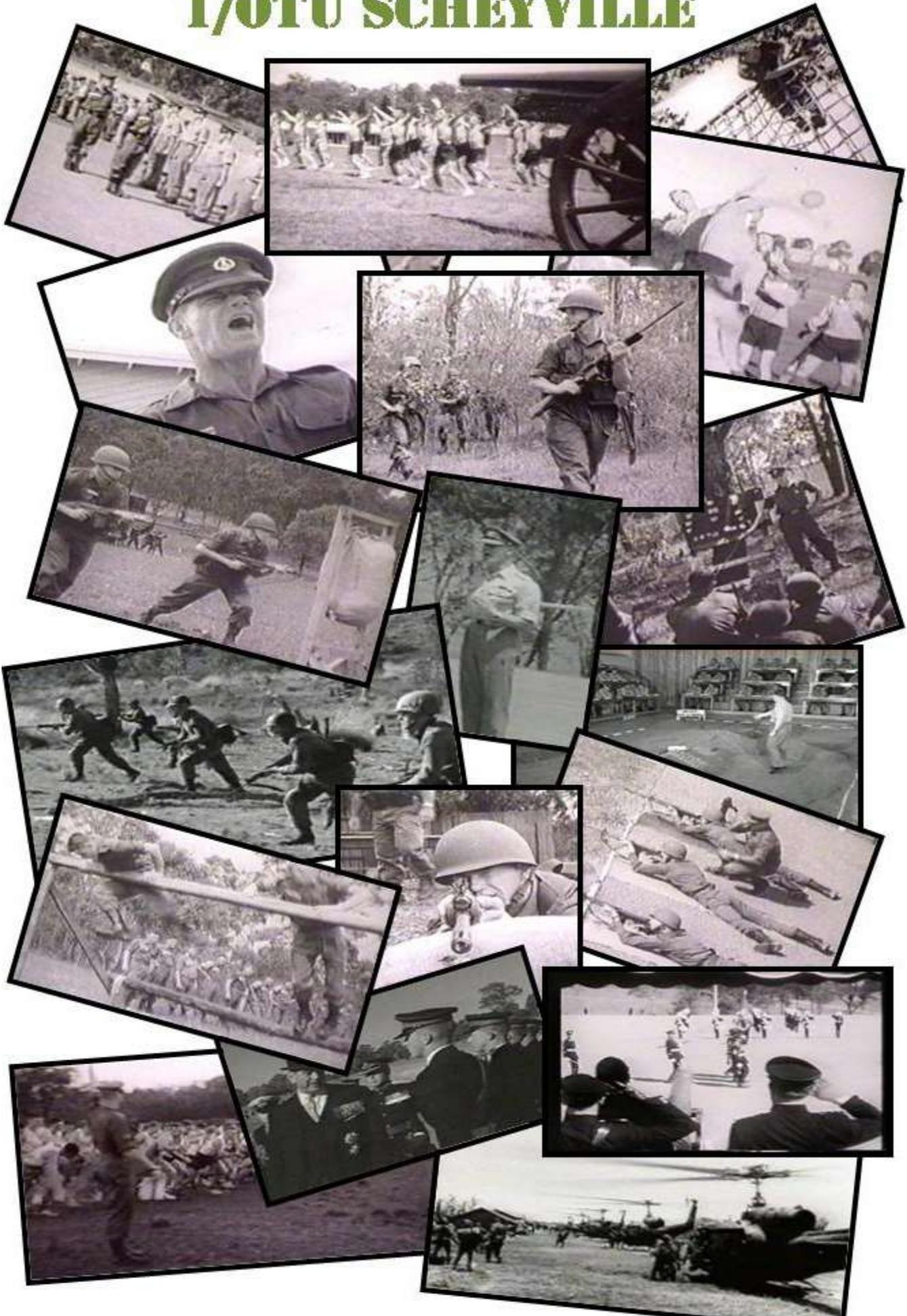
Anything that did not lead directly to this highly-specific outcome was dropped from the course.

Because the candidates had left the RTB before recruit training had completed, the course included all recruit training, Infantry Corps training and a superior level of physical fitness training.

There were 150 days with 4 days off, each day an average of 18-hours. The officer cadets ran between lessons and were assessed strictly on every activity throughout the course.

One in three officer cadets failed to graduate, being returned to an RTB if early in the course or to a Unit if later in the course.

1/0TU SCHEYVILLE



(These photos were flashed on the screen at about half a second per photo... then the audience was asked whether they'd "got all that?". It was an indication of the pace of the Scheyville course.)

In the first two intakes of National Service, the Regular Army had hopes for the scheme but fears as well. The memory of the previous (3-month) scheme suggested that the product would be suspect and the quality of officers produced by Scheyville was yet to be proven.

Thus, when the newly graduated officers joined their units, there was a degree of "closed shop" in the Officers' Mess.

The professional officers had served a minimum of two years already and many, indeed most, had served much longer.

It was not the same among the Diggers.

Most of the Private soldiers were recent recruits or had only served a year or two. Besides, the ratio of Regulars to Nashos was about 50/50. In the Officers' Mess, there were a few Nasho Second Lieutenants among the Platoon Commanders but all the Captains, Majors and above were Regulars.

It would not be until the units were posted to Vietnam in mid-1966 that the Nasho officers would get a chance to prove themselves.

Until then, it was a matter of settling in to the unit and doing the job required of them... ..which was to prepare the unit for operations...



The Diggers had mastered Section-level drills and procedures. The Sections now needed to be instructed and practiced in Platoon-level drills and then Company-level drills.

An intensive period of formations, contact drills, ambush and harbour procedures etc. ensued which, while not at the intensity of Scheyville, was none-the-less at times 24 x 6 if not 7.

The training grounds echoed to the sound of blanks fired in the incessant contact drills. An aggressive fitness program started.

The first Nashos sent to an operational area were 50 or so in 4RAR who, in April 1966, were posted to Borneo.

For those warned out for Vietnam – initially 5RAR to arrive May 1966 and 6RAR to arrive June 1966 – the pre-embarkation exercises included Battalion training and a visit to Canungra Jungle Training Centre (JTC).

The blank rounds were replaced with live rounds and the intensity of both training and fitness programs were increased.

And so we went to Vietnam.....





Vietnam proved that the training had been exactly right – we'd trained for CRW in S E Asia, and that's exactly what we got. The humidity hit everyone who hadn't experienced it in Australia. The dry season was a new experience as was the Monsoon when it arrived. We'd trained for open fields, scrub, plantations, bamboo thickets, jungle and large, steep hills wherever we could find them in Australia... and we got them all in Vietnam.

And the CRW aspect was exactly what we'd trained for too. The enemy was the VC who were relatively few in number and unwilling to be found and brought into a fight. If they saw you first, they'd hide or run. We'd spend a great deal of time looking for them and unless we saw them first, we'd rarely find them. If we shot at them, they'd run away.

Besides patrols and operations to find them, we'd also have to develop the Nui Dat base from scratch. We marched in to a bare rubber plantation and set up the base using hand tools only – no mechanical diggers were made available until the base was secure... but we needed mechanical diggers to make the base secure... Catch 22. It was exhausting work and was interspersed with saturation patrolling of the area immediately outside our forward pits and out to 5000 yards.

It was exactly what we'd trained for. But it wasn't ALL exactly what we'd trained for...



Ten weeks into the Tour, we had the Battle of Long Tan. This time, we didn't need to go looking for the enemy – they came looking for us. When we shot at them, they ran towards us, not away.

It was a few hours of conventional warfare for which none of us had trained.

It might be pointed out that of the 105 men of D Company, 6RAR, who fought the central action of the Battle, about 50% were Nashos and two of the three Platoon Commanders were Nasho officers graduated just 8 months before from Scheyville. The Company Commander had also been a Nasho from the previous National Service scheme of the 50s who'd signed on to the Regular Army.

After Long Tan, there was a further forty weeks of the year-long tour of duty left – back to CRW, intensive patrols and operations to clear the Province and more of what we'd trained for.

The return to Australia was a variable experience for those who had served in Vietnam. For the main units, there was usually a march through the base city before ending the National Service commitment. That event usually added a degree of "closure" and a voicing of appreciation – at least in the case of the early Battalions to return.

For those who returned from Vietnam in small units or groups, there was no march, no "closure", no voice of appreciation. Indeed, for groups returning late in the War, return to Australia often involved arriving at an airport late at night, wearing civilian clothes, taking a bus from the back door of the airport to avoid the protesters and a swift drive to the barracks from which everyone was sent home.



For those returning, despite the reaction from the public, there was a pride that the public, the politician, the press and the protester had no way of understanding.

The Nashos had proved that conscripts could and did match the standards demanded by the professional Army.

They'd raised the bar within the Army itself.

They'd been part of the re-establishment of the Australian military skills reputation that stretched as far back as Gallipoli and more recently in Tobruk and the Owen Stanleys and which hadn't been seen in S E Asia since Kapyong. It was a reminder that the ANZACs were still here... and they were still "fair dinkum".

They'd also been the first exercise of the ANZUS Treaty, with ANZACs and US forces operating for the first time together as specified by the Treaty (Korea was a UN operation and the US was not involved in the Malayan Emergency).

Finally, we knew that we'd been part of the proving to Sukarno that Australia could and would react to his posturing. Should Australia feel obliged to fully mobilize, then a full National Service scheme could and would produce ten times the troops provided by this limited (selective) scheme.

Sukarno soon stopped the sabre-rattling.

Returning home after Vietnam service, Nashos were soon confronted with potent reasons for disappointment. These were men who had survived Vietnam by being able to identify a problem, analyse it, provide a solution and solve the problem by taking prompt and effective action.

What they found back home were protesters and protest movements who had no solutions to offer to address the causes of their protests:



In what way would resisting the draft and failing to register assist in building the larger military that was the vital to addressing the key threats to Australia?

In what way would the "Save Our Sons" Mums address the sabre-rattling from our closest neighbour, Sukarno?



In what way would withdrawing our troops help us resist the spread of communism and the effects of the Domino Theory?



How many times would Dr Cairns address "Rent-A-Rabble" before he returned to his desk and did something about Australia replacing UK influence in S E Asia?

The returning Nashos saw the protest movements and the protesters as hollow – protesting what they saw as wrong but offering no solutions to fix the things they knew to be direct threats to Australia.



The problem was that the returning Nashos had no voice. There was no VietVets' group. No National Service Association. The RSLs were generally luke-warm to the returned Nashos. The politicians and the Press seemed to go out of their way to avoid the "other side" of the protest movements.

Without a voice, the Nashos returned home, resumed their occupations and got on with life.

HOW **EFFECTIVE** WAS THE **OUTCOME**?

WE DID BUILD 9 INFANTRY BATTALIONS PLUS SUPPORT UNITS – AND DEPLOYED THEM TO COMBAT OPERATIONS.....



WE STEPPED INTO THE SEMI-VACUUM CREATED BY UK FORCES WITHDRAWING FROM SOUTH EAST ASIA.....



WE STEPPED UP TO RESIST THE SPREAD OF COMMUNISM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA AND WE SUCCEEDED.....

(WE, THE ALLIES, WON THE SECOND INDO-CHINA WAR IN 1972)



SUKARNO SAW THAT WE COULD AND DID BUILD GOOD MILITARY STRENGTH QUICKLY AND THAT WE WOULD RESIST COMMUNIST EXPANSION IN THE REGION.....

HE STOPPED RATTLING HIS SABRE.



CONCLUSION

- (1) Australia in the 60s recognised the National & International threats
 - (2) It also recognised its own internal weaknesses...
 - (3) It introduced a National Service scheme to address both the weaknesses and the threats...
- (4) The scheme was a high-priority but low-intensity response – the influx of just 15,500 conscripts overseas, and backed by 48,000 at home between 1965 and 1972 addressed the weaknesses of and helped solve the threats to Australia...
- (5) National Service worked so well last time that it begs to be considered again (with adjustments) when we see the current threats and weaknesses of Australia today...

... but *that's* a different Conference...